

# INTERLUDE

WITH her bobbed russet hair, her pansy-blue eyes, her crimson, adventurous mouth, Edna Ashley was what is known in the vulgate as a Peach. But not the clingstone variety. For she had a hatful of ideas—ideas about men and women and what makes them tick—disconcertingly modern, independent ideas.

That's what Bob Harkness discovered when he proposed to her three weeks after he met her, which was a little over three weeks after his arrival in Shanghai. But three weeks is an eternity in Shanghai—I am speaking of the Foreign Settlement, not of Chinese Town, where even three decades mean no more than a passing moment—since the circle of the socially elect is small there and the same people meet almost every night: Monday dinner dance at the American Club, Tuesday at the Masonic Club, Wednesday at the Country Club, and so on until Saturday brings the grand weekly shindy at the Ward Road Athletic Club, commonly and sardonically nicknamed the "Spartans."

On that Saturday Edna and Bob were sitting out the third dance.

He was nearly six feet of not bad-looking, tersely masculine youth, well-bred, well-to-do, quite clever. The trouble with him was that, only son of a doting, widowed mother from whose Boston apron strings he had very recently escaped, he had a pathetically Mid-Victorian outlook on life. So, when he proposed to her, he did it the wrong way. He was deeply in love. His heart was drumming, drumming. But his words were stiff and formal; chiefly his final, bromidic:

"I'm not worthy of you, dear!"

Then—perhaps due to an atavistic throwback to his late, not at all Mid-Victorian father—he tried to kiss her; did it awkwardly; caused her cigarette to burn a hole in her delightful chiffon frock.

"Oh"—she exclaimed—"I won't marry you. You're clumsy—and old-fashioned—two things I can't bear. Go and learn something about love before you speak to me again."

Half in jest she said it, half in earnest. He took it wholly in earnest.

"Very well," he replied curtly and walked away.

On the ballroom threshold he met her father. John Ashley was an Old China Hand and a *Taipan*. This, let me explain to the uninitiated, means that he had lived many years in China, had accumulated great wealth there, and had grown very red-faced—in fact, the more red-faced the *Taipan*, the greater his wealth.

Bob, whose father had been John Ashley's dearest friend, had come to Shanghai on his invitation to be taught the intricacies of Far Eastern trade.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" asked the older man.

"To learn something about love!" came the unexpected reply.

"Well—I'll be damned!" mumbled the other, while Bob left the club, jumped into his 40-horsepower roadster, and shot away through the night, presently squirting a 90-horsepower gasoline stench over the dog-roses and hollyhocks of Nanking Road—the quite wrong side of Nanking Road—where the quite wrong people have a regrettably enjoyable time.

There an hour later—after several drinks and a British baronet's sporting younger son's, "I say, Harkness! Surge

*Bob learns about women from Kitty, in the span of a dance in Shanghai*

*A Short Short Story by*

ACHMED ABDULLAH

over here and meet Kitty!"—he was alone with that same Kitty in her charming drawing-room.

Kitty Bromleigh. If you are the right sort—which, as often as not, means the wrong sort—you may remember her name. It was, incidentally, neither her maiden name nor that of her husband, who had divorced her seventeen years earlier for good and sufficient reasons.

A gorgeously red-haired, violet-eyed Kitty, she pursued the decidedly uneven tenor of her way, sometimes in Paris, again on the Riviera, Cairo, Biarritz—recently in Shanghai.

Not that she liked Shanghai; indeed, she hated it; said so now to Bob:

"Then why do you live here?"

"I don't. I'm here for a few weeks

—to annoy my former husband."

"Oh...?"

"He's rather a bigwig here. And if I annoy him enough, he'll increase my allowance—to get me out of town. Never mind him. Let's talk about you."

Then, when Bob, not exactly knowing what to say but very much wishing to say it, remained silent, she filled his champagne glass and told him how impressionable she was and that she didn't care *what* a man she liked said to her and—an old trick of hers—did he know anything about palmistry and would he mind reading her palm? . . . and she stretched out a slim, narrow hand.

What could he do but take it?

He was about to raise it to his lips,

to kiss it. And again he did an awkward thing. For he upset the champagne glass. It poured its golden, liquid bubbles over Kitty's frock.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "you are so clumsy and, with your silly hand kissing, so frightfully old-fashioned!"

She was amazed when Bob burst into laughter—rather bitter, self-mocking laughter—when she heard him cry:

"That's what *she* said!"

"She? Who?"

"The other girl!"

"What other girl?"

"Edna Ashley!"

A peculiar, almost frightened expression came into Kitty's eyes. He did not notice it. But he did notice how, suddenly, her voice softened:

"Tell me about her!"

When he did not answer she went on:

"Don't want to tell me because, I suppose, my hair is more red than it ought to be and my joy of living more intense? Don't be a moral snob. Nothing worse than that, you know. After all, I'm old enough to be your mother . . . and I do like you . . . and you seem so upset. . . . Why?"—she laughed—"almost as upset as the champagne glass!"

So he told her; and she commented:

"You were wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Yes,"—she sighed—"a woman my age—likes inexperience. But a young girl likes experience—likes to think that the man she loves knows life. Proves to her that, after having known other women, you choose her—for keeps! Go back to her. Ask her nothing. Take her in your arms. . . ."

"And," he interrupted ruefully, "burn another hole in her dress?"

"In that case—listen!" She whispered to him.

"Thank you!" he said simply.

"Don't mention it. You may kiss my hand—now!"

HE DID, and half an hour later, again at the club, he saw Edna Ashley walking up and down the back porch. She was alone. He took her in his arms; kissed her.

"Oh," she expostulated, "you're crushing my dress!"

Then he remembered Kitty's whispered advice.

"Damn your dress!" he replied, and kissed her again.

"I love you—" she stammered—"oh, how I love you, Bob!"

And neither she nor he noticed the Chinese messenger boy who hurried up the gravel path, crossed the back porch, entered the club, and cried:

"Letter for *Taipan* Ashley! Letter for *Taipan* Ashley!"

"Here you are, boy!"

A tip changed hands. So did the letter.

John Ashley read:

Dear John:

I'll leave Shanghai by Monday's boat. Not out of regard for you—don't flatter yourself—but for Edna's sake. She thinks I'm dead, doesn't she? All right. Let her continue to think so.

KITTY.

John Ashley sighed.

"Decent old girl—in a way," he thought. "Guess I'll boost her allowance."

Again he sighed; then smiled as he saw Bob and Edna enter the room—heard Edna's words:

"Bob's got something to say to you, Dad. . . ."



*"After all, I'm old enough to be your mother—and I do like you"*